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Special report on the strategic review of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan

Report of the Secretary-General

I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to paragraph 7 of Security Council resolution 2344 (2017), in which the Council requested me to conduct a strategic review of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) with the goal of assessing the Mission's efficiency and effectiveness in order to optimize the division of labour to ensure better cooperation between United Nations-related organizations. It comprises the findings of the strategic review and my recommendations concerning the mandated tasks, priorities and configuration of UNAMA on the basis of an in-depth review of the Mission.

2. The strategic review team, led by my Special Representative for Iraq, met a wide range of stakeholders in Afghanistan and New York in May and early June 2017, including the President, the Chief Executive, Cabinet members, key members of parliament and political parties, civil society organizations, women's groups and representatives of the diplomatic and donor community, United Nations agencies, funds and programmes and non-governmental organizations. The review also considered the comprehensive review conducted in 2012 (see A/66/728-S/2012/133), internal assessments in the intervening years and the final report of the Tripartite Review Commission on the United Nations in Afghanistan, submitted to the Security Council in September 2015 (see S/2015/713). Lastly, the present report was informed by my own visit to Kabul on 14 June 2017, where I met with the President of Afghanistan, Ashraf Ghani, and the Chief Executive, Abdullah Abdullah, as well as the UNAMA senior leadership and Afghans displaced by conflict.

3. The recommendations arising from the strategic review are calibrated to prepare the United Nations engagement until the end of 2020, the same time frame as for commitments to financial and military assistance made at the summits held in 2016 in Brussels and Warsaw, thereby contributing to a coherent international engagement in Afghanistan. I should note that while the recommendations are

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specific to Afghanistan and were formulated following an in-depth review of the situation and the role of UNAMA, they are consistent with my broader vision for the United Nations in the current global context. In particular, they emphasize the priority of conflict prevention and sustaining peace, on the basis of an expansive understanding of peacebuilding that stresses the political factors but incorporates economic, social and institutional factors. They are also consistent with the recommendations of the High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (see A/70/95-S/2015/446) and the subsequent implementation report of my predecessor (A/70/357-S/2015/682), which stressed unity of effort across the United Nations family, and with my own determination that the United Nations as a system deliver for Member States in a more coherent and effective way.

II. Background

4. Since the establishment of UNAMA in 2002, the Mission's role has been defined by its support for the transition process outlined in the Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the Re-establishment of Permanent Government Institutions, signed in Bonn, Germany, in December 2001, also referred to as the Bonn Agreement. The implementation of the Agreement was premised on the transition to a post-conflict environment, with an armed opposition acting against rather than as a serious hindrance to the achievement of peace and prosperity. In subsequent years, the adoption of a constitution, expanded protection for human rights and civil liberties, democratic elections for the President and parliament and the establishment and growing effectiveness of government and State institutions have been seen. All of those processes were closely supported by UNAMA. Despite progress in those areas, the Taliban-led insurgency began to gain ground, particularly after 2006. Against that backdrop, Afghanistan entered a new phase in 2014 with the peaceful transition from one elected President to another and the transfer of security responsibilities from the International Security Assistance Force, led by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), to the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces.

5. The role of UNAMA evolved as the situation in Afghanistan changed, and the Mission's mandate and scope of activities expanded. Following a phase of expansion, the Mission's strength has been contracting since 2011. In recognition of the sovereignty of Afghanistan and as Afghan State institutions continued to gain capacity, UNAMA increasingly played a supporting role in alignment with the priorities of State institutions. However, real and meaningful progress notwithstanding, the Afghan State currently continues to rely heavily on the international community, both financially and in terms of security support. More than 60 per cent of the Government's budget is financed by foreign donors, and despite immense resources spent on institution-building, at moments of crisis Afghan institutions are at times perceived to be insufficiently effective at mediating between powerful interests and factions that retain autonomous capacities for violence.

6. These internal political rivalries take place in a context in which the legitimacy of the State is contested by the Taliban insurgency. During the early years of the implementation of the Bonn Agreement, it was predicted that the insurgency could be contained or diminished. Subsequent developments proved contrary to that assumption. A political settlement is therefore required. Efforts to begin negotiations towards that end have been made over the past few years, but so far have gained little traction.

7. It is this overall environment — defined by a fragile political consensus among those who recognize the constitutional order and an increasingly violent and sustained insurgency by those who reject that order — in which the United Nations is now operating. Doing so demands a reorientation of its activities. I strongly recommend that the ultimate goal of the Mission over the next several years be to support all efforts to reach sustainable peace and self-reliance in Afghanistan.

8. The strategic review analysed the context and made recommendations on how UNAMA and the wider United Nations system should respond to it in pursuit of the overarching goal: a stable and prosperous Afghanistan with good neighbourly relations, where human rights are upheld and basic services are available to all.

III. Main findings of the strategic review

9. The key observation regarding the current situation in Afghanistan that guides all subsequent recommendations is that Afghanistan is not in a post-conflict situation, where sufficient stability exists to focus on institution-building and development-oriented activities, but a country undergoing a conflict that shows few signs of abating. That is not to say that progress has not occurred, only that it continues to be challenged by the effects of the ongoing conflict, which also threatens the sustainability of the achievements. It is important to underline that institution-building and development can still occur in a conflict, but the United Nations focus must now be as outlined in subsequent sections of the present report.

10. Afghanistan continues to face significant political, security, socioeconomic, humanitarian and human rights challenges. While macroeconomic indicators have improved, including revenue collection, poverty among the rural and urban population has increased. High population growth and accelerated urbanization have created a bulge of mostly urban, unemployed and alienated youth and with it a potential breeding ground for radicalization. Several social indicators remain unsatisfactory, including rising unemployment and uneven access to primary education, health services and justice. The population in need of humanitarian assistance has increased. Significant progress has been made in promoting women's rights and participation, but women in Afghanistan remain unequal partners in the country's political, social and economic spheres. Corruption is widely regarded as a key factor that continues to undermine public trust and confidence in State institutions and thereby further fuels conflict. Improved accountability and good governance, on the other hand, would contribute to stability and peacebuilding.

11. A major achievement of the early implementation of the Bonn process was the agreement on a forward-looking constitution for Afghanistan and the holding of elections to legitimize executive and legislative authority. Despite an erosion in confidence owing to widespread allegations of fraud in previous elections, there remains among Afghan people today a strong aspiration to have the constitutional order observed. For the purposes of domestic political cohesion, it is important that parliamentary elections be held as scheduled in 2018 and presidential elections in 2019, and that both processes be seen as credible by the Afghan electorate.

12. The National Unity Government, established by a political agreement in 2014 after the election results were contested, continues to be under strain. Security and political developments, such as the mass casualty terror attack of 31 May 2017 and subsequent violent clashes between protesters and security forces, exacerbate the friction among the political elites and fuel popular discontent. The attack also led to a significant reduction in the presence of international diplomatic and development actors. Popular discontent has increasingly been demonstrated through large-scale street protests that risk provoking further instability. While the President and the

Chief Executive have stated their commitment to the National Unity Government, political posturing and factional allegiances, often along ethnic lines, have increased ahead of the upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections.

13. The negotiation and partial implementation of a peace agreement between the Government of Afghanistan and Hizb-i Islami Gulbuddin, led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who had previously violently contested the State, was a signal achievement. While the re-emergence of Mr. Hekmatyar on the political scene has generated concern among some Afghan political actors, as well as civil society representatives, including with regard to human rights and ethnic aspects, the agreement demonstrated the ability of Afghan leaders to make the hard choices that peace requires.

14. The overall security situation has deteriorated over the past few years, as the Taliban have been able to influence and, to some extent, control ever larger parts of the country. While some representatives of the Taliban may recognize the need for a political settlement, others feel that they have the upper hand militarily. The situation has been described as an eroding stalemate in which the Taliban have increased the territory they are able to contest and, in some areas, have begun to consolidate their hold. The emergence of Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant — Khorasan Province, although still relatively small in numbers, has added a new, dangerous dimension to an already complex situation. Multiple terror groups, many with regional and international ambitions and often of foreign origin, work in fluid nexuses with local and transnational criminal networks spreading extremism, narcotics, weapons and funding of terror across borders. Opiate production in 2016 is estimated to have generated over $3 billion, much of which supports the insurgency.

15. The Afghan National Defence and Security Forces, with the support of advisers from the NATO-led Resolute Support Mission, currently hold major population centres but have ceded much ground to the Taliban in rural areas. Attrition rates within the national defence forces are unsustainably high, and morale is suffering. A four-year plan currently envisaged by the national defence forces and the Resolute Support Mission is designed to reverse the situation by enabling the national defence forces to be capable of sustaining themselves to initiate decisive counteroffensives in the next two years. This will require the continued support of the international community and the strong will of the Government.

16. The conflict exerts an unacceptable toll on Afghans, particularly civilians. In 2016, UNAMA documented over 11,000 civilian casualties (3,498 deaths), a record number compared to previous years, and an increase in child casualties by 24 per cent. With over 6,000 killed and 15,000 wounded, 2016 became the worst year for Afghan security forces, and the Taliban are likely to have suffered similarly high casualties. Around 650,000 people were internally displaced by the conflict in 2016, while more than 620,000 refugees and undocumented individuals returned from Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran. So far in 2017, fighting in many parts of the country has further intensified, with persisting record high levels of civilian casualties, especially among women and children, and significant displacement.

17. Peace negotiations between the Government and the armed opposition, including direct peace talks with the Taliban, are the only alternative for ending the drawn-out bloody armed conflict in Afghanistan. Earlier in 2017, the President presented his vision for peace to international donors in Kabul and, on 6 June, the Government convened the Kabul process conference on peace and security cooperation to bring under its leadership the different regional and international initiatives.

18. Yet the international consensus on Afghanistan that was a key factor behind early successes is fraying. The Kabul conference represents the Government's resolve to gather the existing multiple parallel peace initiatives under Afghan leadership. Nonetheless, the dynamic in the region needs to improve. Despite numerous public pronouncements on the need for regional cooperation, actors from the region are engaged in Afghanistan on behalf of their particular interests rather than making the compromises necessary to engage on behalf of the common regional interest in stability.

19. A shift towards a peace process through negotiations calls for a parallel adjustment of the role of UNAMA — and the wider United Nations system — from supporting a post-Bonn, post-conflict peacebuilding agenda towards supporting an Afghan-owned peace process that must eventually include direct negotiations with the Taliban.

20. Among the most consistent findings of the strategic review from interlocutors was the recognition of the added value of the United Nations as an impartial actor, and in particular the convening power of UNAMA and its access to all political stakeholders. In the past, this has been particularly useful in, for example, mediating electoral disputes, reporting and engaging parties to the conflict on protection issues and human rights abuses, and promoting the rule of law and international norms. Between the time of reporting and 2020, it is likely that UNAMA will be called upon to act as an impartial mediator between various competing interests within the Government, between the Government and its armed opposition and within the region.

IV. Strategic priorities: the primacy of peace

21. In line with the principle of Afghan sovereignty and the overarching goal of the United Nations to enable a stable and prosperous Afghanistan, the strategic priorities of a special political mission and of the wider United Nations system in Afghanistan should be:

(a) To work with all actors to promote cohesion within the Government and support the development of institutions that, among other things, are able to mediate political differences;

(b) To support all efforts to create conditions in which a political settlement can be reached to end the conflict, including by maintaining contacts with all parties to the conflict;

(c) To support, in alignment with the Government's priorities, endorsed by donors at the conference held in Brussels in 2016, the provision of essential services to the Afghan population and to work to create economic and social conditions that can lead to self-reliance and sustain an eventual negotiated peace.

22. In its pursuit of those priorities, the United Nations should draw on its normative role and use its convening powers to create consensus on political and constitutional arrangements that protect the human rights and fundamental freedoms of all Afghans, and promote the accountability and inclusiveness of the institutions of Afghanistan. The emphasis on peace and conflict prevention will require some changes in the Mission's configuration.

23. The strategic leadership role of my Special Representative for Afghanistan and Head of UNAMA across the political, human rights and development spheres is essential. In exercising overall leadership of the Mission, the Special Representative would continue to be responsible for overseeing the work of the two pillars,

political and developmental, and for ensuring their coherence in fulfilment of the strategic priorities proposed in the present report. The Special Representative will also report to me on how the resources of the Organization may best be used in fulfilment of the mandate with which he or she is entrusted. This will require a higher degree of alignment between and transparency from the wider United Nations system and governing bodies of system agencies, funds and programmes, as well as donors.

V. Reinforced political role

24. The strategic priorities identified will require that renewed prominence be given to supporting peace efforts in all of the Mission's substantive functions, in line with my emphasis on integrating conflict prevention, conflict resolution and peacebuilding into the three pillars of the work of the United Nations. It will also necessitate an institutional structure that reinforces the Mission's political capacity and enables UNAMA, as well as the development and, to the extent possible while adhering to humanitarian principles, humanitarian activities of the United Nations to contribute comprehensively to peace efforts under the leadership of my Special Representative.

25. The political pillar would be headed by a Deputy Special Representative, who would be the Special Representative's principle adviser on political issues. The Deputy Special Representative (Political) would, in consultation with and under the direct guidance of the Special Representative, oversee the varied activities within the pillar. The main functions, some of which are currently disbursed throughout the Mission, that need to be consolidated within the political pillar are: (a) support for internal political stability; (b) support for credible elections in 2018 and 2019; (c) support for an eventual Afghan-owned peace process and reconciliation; and (d) an improvement in regional cooperation around Afghanistan with the objective of securing peace in Afghanistan. All of those functions bear directly on the achievement of the first two strategic priorities and indirectly on the achievement of the third priority.

26. With regard to internal political stability, UNAMA should enhance its efforts to address internal political fragmentation that threatens the stability of the Government, contributes to deepening political and ethnic fault lines and makes the consensus required for peace negotiations more difficult to achieve. To ensure the representativeness and sustainability of the institutions of Afghanistan, UNAMA should pay particular attention to the participation of women and youth in political processes. It should promote a stable and inclusive political environment with respect for the rule of law and constitutional norms and conduct broad outreach to diverse stakeholders, with a focus on building support for the Government's reform agenda and the credibility of government institutions and on improving transparency and accountability.

27. The Mission should, at the request of the Government, support the organization of credible, widely acceptable elections, including efforts to strengthen the sustainability, integrity and inclusiveness of the electoral process. A key component of this would be the provision of capacity-building support and technical advice to the electoral management bodies, in particular, the Independent Election Commission and the Independent Electoral Complaints Commission, in the discharge of their independent roles. The Mission should also support the electoral bodies in their outreach activities as they seek to build political consensus and understanding around an improved electoral process. Such efforts require strong coherence across United Nations entities and the wider international community.

Currently, United Nations support for elections — the date for holding parliamentary and district council elections was recently set for 7 July 2018 — is provided through an electoral support team that comprises elements from UNAMA and the United Nations Development Programme. I endorse this integrated approach, which brings together political and technical elements and might include other United Nations agencies; implementation of the programme would continue to be funded entirely through donor support.

28. A peace process in Afghanistan, including negotiations with the Taliban, must be Afghan-owned; nonetheless, the region and the broader international community also have a stake and influence in helping to create the conditions for peace. At the Kabul process conference of 6 June, the President confirmed that a "strengthened UNAMA would be a key counterpart in this process". Likewise, international and national stakeholders have indicated that the involvement of an impartial actor, such as the United Nations, will be needed to lend credibility and legitimacy to any such process. If requested, UNAMA should therefore support an Afghan-led process through advice on mediation, confidence-building measures, transitional justice, the protection of human rights and civilians, the promotion of international values and norms and the engagement of the armed opposition. Public engagement would also be a key aspect of this, and national dialogue initiatives, such as the Afghan People's Dialogue on Peace, will be important tools on which to build in efforts to ensure that the views of the traditionally marginalized, including residents of rural and remote areas, women and youth, are fed into the high-level political process.

29. As part of its efforts to create an environment conducive to a peace process, UNAMA should continue to support the work and the capacity of the High Peace Council as it reorients its activities towards nationwide consensus-building. This could conceivably include the training of High Peace Council staff and members, assistance with process design and the provision of political and technical expertise in the implementation of peace agreements. The Mission could also work to strengthen the Government's engagement with civil society, community leaders, women's groups and religious elders in peacebuilding activities. Concurrently, the Mission could assist local partners in promoting a whole-of-Government approach to peace. Finally, the UNAMA field offices could scale up their work at the local level by fostering social cohesion in preparation for a high-level peace process, building on the knowledge gained from ongoing peace initiatives. This will require the retention of a broad field presence (see sect. VIII. below), with improved integration of field-level staff into the priority activities of the Mission. In the medium term, UNAMA could focus on promoting mediation efforts if requested by the Government.

30. With regard to regional cooperation and dialogue, an Afghan peace process calls for greater international support and coherence than currently exists. To bring this about would suggest an increased role for the United Nations to support and promote bilateral and multilateral cooperation. It is recommended that UNAMA, in close cooperation with the Government, increase its support for regional dialogue and regional initiatives, as appropriate, in particular the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process on Regional Security and Cooperation for a Secure and Stable Afghanistan and the Kabul process for peace and security cooperation. Consistent with the Government's priorities, this would entail renewed efforts, including greater collaboration with the United Nations Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia, to promote regional coherence on counter-terrorism while maintaining an overall focus on building support for peace negotiations. The Mission would also rely more on its two liaison offices in the Islamic Republic of Iran and in Pakistan.

31. Apart from these established regional processes, UNAMA should endeavour to use its convening capacity to reconsolidate the regional consensus on Afghanistan. This process should go hand in hand with the increased focus of UNAMA on promoting peace. The Government's peace and reconciliation strategy should provide an opportunity for building trust between Afghanistan and its neighbours and create space for enhanced cooperation at the regional level.

32. In line with the demand for greater synergies and more effective use of United Nations resources, UNAMA should, as mentioned above, work more closely with the United Nations Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia, located in Ashgabat. By virtue of its regional mandate, the Regional Centre is positioned to convene the five Central Asian countries, along with relevant regional organizations and other key stakeholders, to discuss and encourage a more coherent regional approach and to support an eventual peace process.

33. In support of the three strategic priorities outlined earlier, the Political Affairs Division of UNAMA may require specialized capacity in areas such as mediation, reconciliation, rule of law (constitution), civil society outreach, transitional justice issues and armed groups/security. Where relevant, the political pillar will draw on broader United Nations expertise with regard to, among other things, mediation, reconciliation, transitional justice, counter-terrorism and sanctions regimes. Additional support could be supplemented by the more proactive use of existing standby mechanisms, such as the Standby Team of Senior Mediation Advisers of the Department of Political Affairs of the Secretariat, and by drawing on the expertise of the wider United Nations system.

34. Underlying these functions is the need for a robust analytical capacity within the Mission. Conflict prevention, conflict management and the design and implementation of effective peace strategies all depend on an accurate and timely analysis of the evolving tensions and the main actors in the conflict, as well as an understanding of their positions and influencing factors. This includes a cross-cutting understanding of the political economy that has emerged around the conflict, which makes its resolution more difficult. In this context, I recommend that the integrated analytical capacity, with its cross-cutting approach, be incorporated into the political pillar.

35. Owing to the reduced international military presence and the change of its role to advising, training and assisting, I recommend the abolishment of the Military Advisory Unit. One post of Senior Military Adviser should be retained within the Political Affairs Division to liaise with international military forces, contribute to the integrated analysis of the Division and the Mission as a whole and provide strategic-level advice on military affairs to the Mission leadership. I also recommend that the Police Advisory Unit and the Rule of Law Unit be abolished. A smaller rule of law capacity should be located in the Political Affairs Division to advise on normative issues, including on justice and anti-corruption measures.

36. A suggestion raised by some senior Afghan officials and international interlocutors and contested by others in the course of the strategic review was the potential for a high-level United Nations regional envoy. I believe that the time and conditions are not currently assessed to be ripe for this initiative. Rising demands on my Special Representative in Kabul relating to internal politics and electoral developments could foreshadow such a division of labour at a later stage.

VI. United Nations Assistance Mission for Afghanistan and the United Nations country team: implementing development for peace

37. The third strategic priority is critical to promoting and sustaining the political efforts calibrated to securing peace. It entails ensuring the coherence of support in alignment with the Government's priorities and promoting the development of the underpinning structures necessary for long-term socioeconomic development in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

38. The President of Afghanistan has expressed concern regarding the work of the United Nations agencies and the need for better alignment with Government priorities. That concern is shared among other Afghan interlocutors. They have also stressed the need to reduce what they view as high transaction costs, improve transparency, strengthen the focus on building national capacity and reduce the number of interlocutors for the Government. Other Government representatives, in particular those from line ministries with core agreements with agencies, have spoken highly of the work of different agencies. Furthermore, a number of international donors have pointed out that United Nations agencies remain an important and trusted vehicle for development cooperation. My recommendation is therefore that the Mission's functions to coordinate international development work and to promote increased coherence need to be more focused on effective delivery in alignment with the national priorities endorsed by donors at the conference held in Brussels in 2016, as described below.

39. The second pillar would be headed by a Deputy Special Representative/Resident Coordinator/Humanitarian Coordinator who, in consultation with and under the direction of my Special Representative, is responsible for the work of the pillar and for leading and overseeing the United Nations country team. The incumbent would be responsible for ensuring United Nations delivery against the third strategic priority. In this regard, it is recommended that the Deputy Special Representative/Resident Coordinator/Humanitarian Coordinator has delegated responsibility to be the primary interlocutor and focal point with the Government and international donors on behalf of the country team and separately, in his or her capacity as Humanitarian Coordinator, the humanitarian community. The implementation of this recommendation, however, will depend on the commitment of the United Nations system agencies, funds and programmes, their governing boards and donors.

40. Instead of engaging in a limited number of programmatic activities, which included a now completed donor-funded project on women in community policing, the pillar would focus on strategic coordination. The main functions that need to be consolidated within the second pillar are the continued and strengthened ability to coordinate the international community's civilian efforts in Afghanistan, including the promotion of more coherent support for the Government's priorities, and the leadership of the United Nations country team, all while maintaining principled humanitarian action where people are in need. Both of these functions bear directly on the achievement of the third strategic priority and indirectly on the achievement of the first and second priorities.

41. Interlocutors of the strategic review team valued the role of UNAMA in coordinating international assistance, including strengthened donor coordination. With the enhancement of the responsibilities of the Deputy Special Representative/Resident Coordinator/Humanitarian Coordinator, UNAMA should have the means by which to contribute more effectively in its role as the Co-Chair of the Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board.

42. With the aim of a focused approach for development to ensure maximum impact and coherence, United Nations development activities need to be aligned closely with the Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework while reflecting the global objectives of the United Nations, in particular the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In 2016, United Nations agencies spent $1.3 billion in Afghanistan, including both development and humanitarian funding. Over 90 per cent of the funding was in six thematic areas (agriculture, education, health, return and reintegration, rule of law, and the normative functions) carried out by various agencies. This differs somewhat, however, from the United Nations Development Assistance Framework, which was formulated prior to the establishment of the current Government and is based on five pillars: equitable economic development, basic social services, social equity and human capital, justice and the rule of law, and accountable governance.

43. To ensure a system-wide response to national priorities, in line with my report on the repositioning of the United Nations development system (2017), the United Nations Development Assistance Framework is being revised in consultation with the Government with a view to it being endorsed by the Government. It is envisaged that each thematic area will have a lead agency to coordinate with others having clearly defined responsibilities and contributing in accordance with respective outcomes. Agencies should increasingly consider joint programmes as a preferred delivery option. Such an approach could significantly reduce parallel programme implementation mechanisms as a means to strengthen national capacities and reduce transaction costs. It could also help to ensure better synergy between development and humanitarian activities in Afghanistan while fully respecting humanitarian space and principles and the responsibilities of the Humanitarian Coordinator.

44. To strengthen strategic coordination, the possible merits of supporting donor coordination efforts with peacebuilding expertise could be further examined. Operating in close cooperation with the political pillar and the human rights component, such efforts could, among other things, include advice on and support for suitable peacebuilding approaches across United Nations programming at the national and subnational levels, with a particular focus on alignment, particularly in support of an eventual future peace agreement. Such a peacebuilding component could also enhance the Mission's capacity to support the Joint Monitoring and Coordination Board.

45. It is also recommended that the Governance Unit, with its presences in Kabul and field offices, be discontinued. The Government's efforts to promote effective and accountable subnational governance may benefit from normative advice from a small group of dedicated experts at UNAMA headquarters (second pillar). Even without dedicated field staff, these few experts would still be informed by the reporting from the Mission's field offices.

46. While the Deputy Special Representative/Resident Coordinator/Humanitarian Coordinator and the United Nations country team would be mutually accountable for performance and for a shared contribution to Afghanistan's priorities, respective United Nations system agencies, funds and programmes would remain responsible for the implementation of programme components and be accountable to their respective agency heads and to respective donors. Nonetheless, the country team will be expected to demonstrate to the Government how, as a whole, it has contributed to the economic and social progress of Afghanistan, including by being able to describe how funding has been spent on a sectoral and geographical basis.

47. It is recognized that the coordination of United Nations system agencies, funds and programmes is challenged by the fact that each of these entities has its own line of authority, budget and timeline. Furthermore, agencies rely on donor funding for

their activities and are often encouraged to react to donor priorities, which may not always be fully aligned with the priorities articulated in the Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework. In this regard, more cohesion between this pillar's constituent parts, in particular, robust donor coordination and the Resident Coordinator's team, could enable synergies (including donor mobilization) and alignment with national priorities. In this regard, I welcome the recent commitment of the President to periodically participate in meetings of the United Nations country team.

VII. Human rights: impartiality and credibility

48. The UNAMA Human Rights Unit represents the third pillar of the United Nations system. Its reporting in particular has been a major element of the Mission's overall credibility as an impartial actor in Afghanistan. Consistent and high-quality unbiased reporting and engagement with the parties to the conflict has helped to establish UNAMA as an impartial interlocutor. Dialogue with armed elements, notably the Taliban, on the protection of civilians has proven valuable, will remain important in the future and may provide entry points for a more substantive political negotiation. Humanitarian dialogue and negotiations on access for humanitarian actors will also continue to be important going forward. It is essential, therefore, that the Human Rights Unit continue to prioritize its monitoring, reporting and advocacy on the protection of civilians in armed conflict; the protection of children affected by armed conflict; the promotion of gender equality and the elimination of violence against women and conflict-related sexual violence; and the prevention of torture. The Unit also has responsibilities to enhance the integration of human rights in United Nations country team/humanitarian country team programming, including compliance with the United Nations human rights due diligence policy.

49. At the same time, in line with the Government's priorities, UNAMA should expand its efforts to build the capacity of national institutions, in particular the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, and promote the institutionalization of human rights protection within the country's security entities. UNAMA should also strengthen its engagement with Afghan and other institutions to follow up on recommendations of its human rights reporting. This would not entail additional resources, but rather a recalibration within the Human Rights Unit.

50. I intend to move the post of Senior Gender Adviser from the Human Rights Unit to the Office of my Special Representative, consistent with Security Council resolution 2242 (2015) on women, peace and security as well as the recommendations of the High-level Independent Panel on United Nations Peace Operations. This structure, which would bring UNAMA in line with special political missions worldwide, would enable the Senior Gender Adviser to more effectively provide strategic and political advice to the Mission's leaders and across units as they work to promote the meaningful participation of women in conflict prevention, conflict resolution and political processes and improve the representation of women in governance structures. Mission-wide, there is a need to further build capacity on gender mainstreaming among staff so that the efforts of the Senior Gender Adviser are effectively supported by gender expertise embedded in all functional units.

VIII. Field presence of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan

51. UNAMA currently has six regional offices (covering several provinces) and six provincial offices (covering certain provinces that are deemed to be of particular

strategic importance). The UNAMA field presence is one of the most visible manifestations of the Organization's lasting commitment to and engagement in supporting Afghans all over the country. The offices conduct outreach throughout the country, support mandate implementation and provide reporting to the Mission's headquarters. The strategic review team found that international donors and partners strongly supported the work of the offices, as did subnational stakeholders, while the President was more sceptical of their benefits, particularly the Mission's engagement in promoting subnational governance.

52. There are clear benefits to retaining a broad presence throughout the country, balanced with cost and security factors. With the general drawdown of the international presence having begun in 2014, local-level interlocutors, from governors to community members, have expressed on numerous occasions the profound hope that UNAMA stays; the United Nations presence is the last indication to many of the continuous international commitment to Afghanistan. This factor is particularly relevant in areas dominated by ethnic minorities, where the United Nations is often the only international organization present and is seen as a means of transmitting concerns to a central Government sometimes perceived as distant or indifferent. It is also relevant at this time, when the Government's own reach over the national territory is uneven and contested.

53. Local-level interlocutors also referred to the mediation support role that UNAMA plays in the field through its local peace initiatives, which simply cannot be implemented from afar. Moreover, UNAMA is able to direct the attention of local leaders to areas that they may otherwise overlook and is uniquely placed to act as a connector between local communities/authorities and the relevant ministries in Kabul. This is an important but invisible effort that has a real impact, even if it is difficult to quantify.

54. As areas are cleared of insurgents, or if access increases as the result of either a convincing peace process or local-level ceasefires, there will be a need to support a return to normality. UNAMA has an important role in making such an effort as effective as possible. This also cannot be done from far away, and addresses the need for greater co-location with United Nations system agencies, funds and programmes.

55. Taking into account outreach, cost and potential security implications, the strategic review team considered a number of scenarios, taking into account effectiveness, cost efficiencies and security considerations. On the basis of those criteria, I recommend that UNAMA close one provincial office (Farah Province); outreach to the province would, if conditions permit, be conducted from the regional office in Herat. In addition, United Nations Headquarters and the Mission will explore the feasibility of further nationalizing functions in the remaining five provincial offices without compromising the implementation of the mandate or the safety of staff. While the nationalization of provincial offices could potentially facilitate co-location with other United Nations system agencies, certain functions, such as political and human rights monitoring, as well as information and communications technology, may prove too sensitive. Lastly, it is recommended that the Mission assess the option of reducing international posts in the six regional offices over the coming years by forming smaller, multidisciplinary teams whose staff individually possess broad skill sets, with the exception of human rights staff, who need to maintain a distinct operational independence.

56. Should Member States express determination for an immediate, larger reduction of the UNAMA field presence, several observations and considerations apply. First, a significant reduction of offices would need to take place in phases, not least because of the administrative and logistical burden on the Mission, but

mainly because of the perception and related messaging required. The closure of several offices simultaneously would likely be interpreted as a reduction in the international community's commitment to Afghanistan. Due consideration should also be given to the political environment, particularly the upcoming 2018-2019 election cycle, in the timing of this decision. It would also be important to ensure that the remaining UNAMA presence covers all regions where the different ethnic communities in Afghanistan are represented for as long as security allows. Second, the decision to close offices is essentially irrevocable. Third, there would be a one-time cost for closing the offices, given contract termination and, as applicable, severance allowances, the need for transport of reusable assets and other costs. Expected cost savings from the closure of offices would likely not be immediate.

IX. Mission support and security

57. The provision of adequate security remains a precondition for the United Nations presence in Afghanistan. The security situation in Afghanistan remains difficult and poses corresponding operational challenges for the United Nations in delivering mandated tasks and activities. Most recently, several United Nations compounds in Kabul were damaged by the suicide truck bombing of 31 May 2017 that affected the international community. A number of embassies were forced to withdraw staff owing to extensive damage to their facilities. To date, UNAMA has not had to reduce its staffing numbers and continues to function as before. The evolving threat picture, however, will likely require further adjustments to the security posture of the United Nations, including the strengthening of facilities against the possibility of an acutely increased magnitude of explosives being employed by insurgents.

58. The security arrangements required to ensure the adequate delivery of mandated tasks and activities impose significant costs. In 2017, 24 per cent of the UNAMA budget was allocated to security-related costs. Therefore, opportunities to increase synergies, share costs and perform cost recovery, including with United Nations system agencies, funds and programmes, need to be further explored. Such opportunities include the use of joint services, such as guard forces, and the sharing of resources, including through greater co-location. Some synergies are already being achieved in the areas of security training, the operations centre, the Air Terminal Unit at Kabul airport and countrywide radio rooms. The establishment of joint medical services should also be envisaged as a priority to ensure uniform and more rationalized medical care for all United Nations staff.

59. UNAMA has initiated a number of cost-saving measures, including a reconfiguration of air assets and greater integration with the United Nations Humanitarian Air Service to avoid duplication; the streamlining of support services, including medical and ground transportation services; and improved cost recovery for services provided to United Nations system agencies, funds and programmes. Additional opportunities for co-location between UNAMA and the United Nations system agencies, funds and programmes need to be explored for financial and security reasons.

X. Conclusion

60. I welcomed the opportunity provided by the request of the Security Council for a strategic review of UNAMA. For more than 15 years, the effort to create a stable and prosperous Afghanistan has been a major goal of the international community, for which huge efforts and resources have been provided and in which

the United Nations has played a vital role. That role, however, has had to change over time as the context has evolved. As the strategic review suggests, the time has come again for a change in how the United Nations operates in Afghanistan.

61. Afghanistan is once again in a period of increasing insecurity and fragility. Beyond the immediate suffering being inflicted upon the Afghan people, the armed conflict is impeding efforts to bring the political and economic progress that will ultimately ensure stability. This situation cannot continue indefinitely; the Afghan people need a future to look forward to. Without a peace process, the sustainability and viability of all of our joint efforts to bring stability and prosperity to Afghanistan will be called into question.

62. I recommend that the findings of the strategic review as set out in the present report be incorporated into the next mandate of UNAMA. I would also like to express my gratitude to my Special Representative for Iraq and Head of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq, Ján Kubiš, for leading the strategic review and to my Special Representative for Afghanistan and Head of UNAMA, Tadamichi Yamamoto, for his leadership of the Mission, as well as all United Nations personnel in Afghanistan for their support for and participation in the strategic review. I would also like to thank all of those interlocutors, especially Afghan counterparts, who generously provided their views on the role of UNAMA for the purposes of the review. My recommendations for the future focus and configuration of the Mission and related United Nations entities take into account the view expressed by many interlocutors of the important role of UNAMA in supporting the progress of Afghanistan towards peace, stability and prosperity, despite inevitable obstacles. Going forward, the strengthening of the strategic partnership between the Government and UNAMA, in particular, will be key to ensuring the effective implementation of the international community's support for lasting peace and development in Afghanistan.